

Annual Report

Protecting nature. Empowering communities.

2023

About this report

This annual report presents EcoAlbania's work, results and learnings throughout 2023, a year of commitment, advocacy, and collective action for the protection of Albania's rivers, biodiversity, and natural ecosystems.

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FOREWORD

Table of Contents

What you will find in this report

Foreword	4
A year of shared action	5
About EcoAlbania	7
Mission, vision & approach	8
2023 in focus	9
Highlights of the year	10
Our Work	11
Our work in 2023	12
Europe’s 1st Wild River National Park Vjosa-Aoós	13
Improve Sustainability of South-Eastern CCAs in Albania- ISCCA	16
ESPID4Vjosa- Enhancing a Science-Policy	
Interface Development for the Vjosa	20
Supporting and Developing Widening Strategies to	
Tackle Hydroclimatic Extreme Events (SD – WISHEES)	23
Watershed Environmental Education	25
Albanian Waterfrog Conservation	28
NGOs for Biodiversity Conservation	31
Communication	34
Communication & Outreach	35
Financials	36
Financial Overview	37
Reflections & Outlook	38
Challenges & lessons learned	39
Looking ahead to 2026	41

01

Foreword

A message from the Executive Director on the year that was, and the work ahead.



Olsi Nika – Executive Director

A year of shared action

Dear friends, partners, supporters, and members of the EcoAlbania community,

Some years stand out not only because of what they bring, but because of what they represent. For EcoAlbania, 2023 will always be remembered as such a year that transformed a dream shared by many into a reality that will inspire generations to come.

The declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park in March 2023 marked a historic moment for Albania and for Europe. It was the culmination of more than a decade of dedication, perseverance, and collaboration among local communities, scientists, environmental organizations, institutions, and supporters from around the world. Together, we proved that development and conservation are not opposing forces, and that nature, when given a voice, can unite people across borders and cultures around a common purpose.

Yet, this milestone was never an end in itself. Rather, it marked the beginning of a new chapter. Throughout the year, we remained committed to ensuring that the promise of protection translates into meaningful action. We continued to defend the integrity of the Vjosa river system, advanced scientific cooperation and transboundary dialogue, and strengthened the role of civil society in shaping sustainable solutions for the future. At the same time, we expanded our efforts beyond rivers by promoting ecological connectivity, supporting biodiversity conservation, engaging with young generations through environmental education, and participating in international initiatives addressing the growing challenges posed by climate change.

The experiences of 2023 reminded us that conservation is not built through individual victories alone. Behind every achievement are communities willing to stand for their rivers and landscapes, researchers contributing knowledge, teachers inspiring future generations, institutions embracing responsibility, and partners who believe that a different future is possible. I am deeply grateful to all those who have walked this path with us and whose trust and support continue to strengthen our mission.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to the EcoAlbania team. Their commitment, professionalism, and unwavering belief in our values have been instrumental in transforming ideas into action and challenges into opportunities. The successes of this year are the result of countless efforts, many of them taking place far from the spotlight, driven by a genuine passion for protecting our natural heritage.

As we look ahead, we do so with optimism and humility. The work before us remains considerable, and the challenges facing nature continue to evolve. However, 2023 has shown us that when people come together around a shared vision, even the most ambitious goals can become reality. This conviction gives us confidence and responsibility as we continue working towards a future where Albania's extraordinary biodiversity and natural landscapes are protected and valued for generations to come.

Thank you for being part of this journey and for believing that nature deserves not only our admiration, but also our commitment.

Olsi Nika

Executive Director, EcoAlbania

"The most meaningful victories are not those that mark the end of a journey, but those that inspire us to begin a new one."

02

About EcoAlbania

Center for Protection of Natural Ecosystems
in Albania. Who we are, why we do this.

ABOUT

Mission, vision & approach

About EcoAlbania

The Center for Protection of Natural Ecosystems in Albania (EcoAlbania) is a non-governmental environmental organization, committed to safeguarding the country's biodiversity, and natural heritage. Established in 2014 with a strong belief in the intrinsic value of nature, EcoAlbania works to preserve ecological integrity while promoting sustainable pathways for socio-economic development.

At the heart of EcoAlbania's mission lies the protection of natural ecosystems and the complex interactions that sustain them. By focusing on the conservation of wildlife and their habitats, the organization advocates for the responsible and sustainable use of natural resources, ensuring that environmental stewardship goes hand in hand with human well-being. EcoAlbania recognizes that long-term prosperity depends on maintaining the balance between nature and society.

EcoAlbania's approach is multidisciplinary and collaborative. Its work integrates scientific research, policy advocacy, community engagement, and strategic communication to advance sustainable development models. Through evidence-based initiatives and partnerships with local communities, institutions, and international stakeholders, the organization strives to influence decision-making processes and inspire collective action for environmental protection and nature conservation.

Mission

EcoAlbania works to strengthen the harmonious coexistence between people and nature in Albania.

Vision

A future where Albania's biodiversity, natural landscapes, and communities flourish together in balance and resilience.

03

2023 in Focus

Key moments, milestones, and reach, in words, numbers, and visuals.

OVERVIEW

Highlights of the year



The year 2023 marked a defining chapter in EcoAlbania’s journey, characterized by both historic achievements and the expansion of new areas of work. Building on more than a decade of efforts to protect Albania’s natural heritage, EcoAlbania contributed to the declaration of Europe’s first Wild River National Park, securing a milestone not only for Albania but also for river conservation across Europe. Throughout the year, the organization continued to strengthen science-based conservation and advocacy efforts, monitor emerging threats to the Vjosa river system and its tributaries, and support the effective implementation of the newly established protected area. At the same time, EcoAlbania advanced scientific cooperation, fostered dialogue among institutions and civil society, and strengthened transboundary collaboration within the Vjosa/Aoös basin, while advocating for the protection of biodiversity and the integrity of Albania’s network of protected areas.

Beyond river conservation, 2023 marked the launch of new initiatives aimed at promoting ecological connectivity, climate resilience, and species conservation. Through the ISCCA project, EcoAlbania initiated efforts to strengthen ecological corridors and promote participatory landscape management in south-eastern Albania. The organization also contributed to European research initiatives addressing hydroclimatic challenges, advanced the conservation of the Albanian water frog through scientific monitoring and the development of a Species Action Plan, and expanded environmental education activities reaching schools and communities across the country. Through strategic communication, public engagement, and collaboration with national and international partners, EcoAlbania continued to strengthen its role as a leading voice for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development in Albania and the Western Balkans.

04

Our Work

7 projects, one mission, protecting rivers,
restoring ecosystems, empowering
communities.

PORTFOLIO

Our work in 2023

In 2023, EcoAlbania implemented a portfolio of five active projects spanning river protection, biodiversity, education, and the science–policy interface. Each project advanced one or more of the organization’s strategic pillars: protecting rivers, restoring habitats, engaging communities, and influencing policy.

PROJECT 01

Europe’s 1st Wild River National Park — Vjosa–Aoós

Area: Vjosa River valley

PROJECT 02

Improve Sustainability of CCAs in Albania (ISCCA)

Area: Northern Part of the Polis– Valamarë– Rungajë– Moravë–Gramoz Ecological Corridor

PROJECT 03

ESPID4Vjosa — Science–Policy Interface

Area: Vjosa River Basin

PROJECT 04

SD–WISHEES — Hydroclimatic Resilience

Area: Mediterranean Basin,Balkan Peninsula, and Africa

PROJECT 05

Watershed Environmental Education

Area: 11 schools in 4 districts across Albania

PROJECT 06

Albanian Water Frog Conservation

Area: Coastal Albania from Buna–Velipoja Protected Landscape to Orikum Lagoon

PROJECT 07

NGOs for Biodiversity Conservation

Area: Environmental Protected Areas Netowrk in Albania

PROJECT

Europe's 1st Wild River National Park Vjosa-Aoós

OVERALL GOAL

Ensure effective management of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, including the expansion of its boundaries to cover key tributaries and the river delta, while promoting it as a regional model for nature conservation.

DONOR

Holdfast Foundation, Techow Foundation,
Age Jensen Foundation

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

EcoAlbania, EuroNatur, Riverwatch

PROJECT AREA

Vjosa River valley

Project Key Actions

The main achievement for the year 2023 was Vjosa Wild River becoming a National Park. The declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park on March 2023 is the result of more than ten years of unstinting efforts working for the preservation of one of the last wild rivers in Europe. Despite the Vjosa and its free-flowing tributaries being declared a National Park, the delta is not included in the newly declared protected area and all the while is faced with pressure from infrastructure development projects (airport, touristic resorts, road constructions etc.).

Scientific Efforts

In April 2023, a group of scientists from Albania and Austria held the Vjosa Science Week, assessing the delta of the Vjosa Wild River National Park (WRNP). The interdisciplinary team of national and international scientists assessed the biodiversity, geology, and physico-chemical conditions of the Vjosa river and delta, aiming to highlight the natural characteristics of the delta. To support these efforts, national and international scientists sent an open letter to the Albanian government for the conservation of the Vjosa Delta. The letter was supported by the participating scientists of the International Symposium for the Vjosa Delta.

Moreover, the efforts supporting the case opened by EcoAlbania to the Bern Convention were intensified. In December 2023 the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention urged the Albanian government once again to suspend construction works for Vlora airport within the protected area of Narta Lagoon and Vjosa Delta as it has been found to violate international conventions.



Monitoring

As a result of the continuous watchdogging, two main pressures were identified as threats to the integrity of the National Park:

- **Water diversion project in Kardhiq River** – tributary to Drino: The irrigation scheme foresees the diversion of a significant amount of water from the Kardhiqi riverbed. This is expected to have an irreversible negative impact on the residual flow and may affect the ecological integrity of this part of the Vjosa WRNP. In this regard, during the summer of 2023, a fact checking followed by an on-the-spot appraisal by EcoAlbania has taken place. A short report with all outcomes was sent to the Ministry of Tourism and Environment to further address the concern.
- **Water supply project in Shushica River.**
Just a few months after the proclamation of the Vjosa WRNP, another devastating intervention in the Shushica tributary has started. The diversion of one of the main springs of Shushica towards the coastline settlements, for drinkable water supply, may put the whole vision of the WRNP into question. This project has been under construction since January 2023. To address this concern, a multangular strategic reaction is set up, which includes the gathering of information, raising awareness through media, mobilization of the local communities and the initiation of a lawsuit against the diversion project.

Key Contributions

The project team has contributed to the implementation process of the VWRNP and its specific working groups by advising and assisting during the consultation process, participating in the working groups meetings, and raising pressing issues that need to be addressed in the management plan and the governance model of the Vjosa WRNP.

Achievements

A great achievement of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe partners that follows the declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, was the decision of the Greek Government in November 2023 to extend the protection of the Aoós river in Greece and its unprotected tributaries by declaring it as a Protected Natural Formation and Protected Landscape, thus, ensuring the protection of the entire Vjosa/Aoós River catchment.



PROJECT

Improve Sustainability of South-Eastern CCAs in Albania- ISCCA

OVERALL GOAL

Maintain and improve ecological connectivity of Polis-Valamarë-Rungajë-Moravë-Gramoz CCA through a sustainable and participatory governance approach.

DONOR

Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust (PONT)

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

EcoAlbania

PROJECT AREA

Northern Part of the Polis- Valamarë-Rungajë-Moravë-Gramoz Ecological Corridor

Project Key Actions

A new initiative, the ISCCA project, was launched this year, aiming to strengthen ecological connectivity between areas of high biodiversity value and promote sustainable territorial development beyond protected area boundaries. The project focuses on enhancing stakeholder engagement in ecological corridor management and raising awareness of the importance of ecological connectivity for biodiversity conservation.

The project area includes five protected areas: Shebenik National Park, Stravaj-Sopot Natural Park, Pogradec Lake Protected Landscape, Guri i Nikës Protected Landscape, and Mali i Tomorrit National Park, partially covering the municipalities of Librazhd, Prrenjas, Pogradec, Gramsh, Maliq, and Skrapar.

Stakeholder Engagement and Initial Field Consultations

The project was initiated with a series of field meetings across the six municipalities within the ecological corridor, marking the first step in establishing cooperation with key local stakeholders. The meetings aimed to introduce the project, identify relevant institutional and community actors, and gather initial input on local priorities related to ecological connectivity and sustainable territorial development.

The consultation process involved representatives from municipalities, Regional Administration of Protected Areas (RAPAs), and local NGOs, helping establish the basis for future cooperation and upcoming project activities. development policies.



Project Kick-off and Official Launch

The project was officially launched through a kick-off meeting in Elbasan, bringing together representatives from municipalities, RAPAs, prefectures, NGOs, academics, and environmental experts from the Korçë, Berat, and Elbasan regions.

Discussions focused on the importance of ecological corridors for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, while emphasizing the need to integrate ecological connectivity into legal and territorial planning frameworks. The meeting also introduced the project's main activities, including the development of the Action Plan for the corridor.



Socio-Economic Assessment of the Ecological Corridor

A socio-economic assessment of the ecological corridor was developed to explore its potential for sustainable development through ecotourism and agritourism. The study highlighted the strong link between local livelihoods, agriculture, and natural resources, while identifying opportunities and challenges for sustainable tourism development.

Baseline Assessment of the Ecological Corridor

A baseline assessment of the corridor was carried out to analyze rural development, environmental conditions, and territorial planning frameworks within the project area. The study identified key ecological values, land-use patterns, and development pressures, while providing recommendations to support long-term ecological connectivity and sustainable management of the corridor.

Environmental Education Activities with Schools

Environmental education activities were carried out to strengthen awareness of ecological connectivity and the importance of ecological corridors for biodiversity conservation. Students were introduced to the concept of habitat fragmentation and the role of corridors in enabling the movement of key wildlife species such as the Balkan Lynx, Brown Bear, and Wolf.

The sessions combined short presentations with interactive outdoor games, including simulations of ecological corridors and human impacts on ecosystems. These activities helped students better understand the effects of human pressures on wildlife movement and the importance of maintaining connected habitats. A baseline assessment of the corridor was carried out to analyze rural development, environmental conditions, and territorial planning frameworks within the project area. The study identified key ecological values, land-use patterns, and development pressures, while providing recommendations to support long-term ecological connectivity and sustainable management of the corridor.



Workshop Series on the Development of the Action Plan

The first seminar of the workshop series for the development of the Action Plan was held in Librazhd with representatives from municipalities, RAPA Elbasan, local NGOs, and the tourism sector.

Discussions focused on strengthening institutional engagement in natural resource management, addressing environmental pressures within the corridor, and emphasizing the importance of conserving the Bushtrica River as one of the remaining near-pristine river systems in the area.



PROJECT

ESPID4Vjosa- Enhancing a Science-Policy Interface Development for the Vjosa

OVERALL GOAL

Building on previous efforts to highlight the importance of the Vjosa River’s values, EuroNatur and EcoAlbania are implementing the “ESPID4Vjosa” project, which aims to strengthen the link between science, decision-making institutions, and society by enhancing science-based support for governance processes and fostering dialogue among key stakeholders.

DONOR

Austrian Development Agency (ADA)

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

EuroNatur & EcoAlbania

PROJECT AREA

Vjosa River Basin

Project Key Actions

The ESPID4Vjosa project, with an implementation period from December 2021 to May 2025, continued to strengthen the cooperation between science, policymaking, and civil society for the sustainable management of the Vjosa River Basin throughout 2023. The year 2023 marked an important phase in consolidating the project’s activities, with a strong focus on interinstitutional cooperation, scientific research, civil society engagement, for an integrated river basin management. ESPID4Vjosa fulfilled these actions even within the context of the declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park in March 2023.

Stakeholder Engagement & Workshops



One of the project's key activities was the organization of the third "Science Week" in April 2023 in the Vjosa Delta, in cooperation with other initiatives such as VjoSusDev. The activity brought together universities, experts, students, and institutions to collect new scientific data on biodiversity, hydrology, geomorphology, and water quality. The findings were later presented during a symposium organized in October 2023, which served as a platform for scientific exchange and discussion on priorities for the management and protection of the Vjosa ecosystem.

During 2023, the project also organized thematic workshops in Përmet and Gjirokastër focusing on water management, flood risks, hydropower, protected areas, ecotourism, and climate change. These workshops created important spaces for dialogue and cooperation among local authorities, experts, civil society organizations, and local communities.

The project also placed strong emphasis on transboundary cooperation between Albania and Greece. Two cross-border exchange visits were organized in Ioannina and Vlora to strengthen institutional dialogue and cooperation on the integrated management of the Vjosa/Aoös River Basin. Discussions focused on river basin management planning, institutional coordination, and opportunities for long-term cooperation between the two countries.

Additional activities during 2023 included two "PitStop AMBU" coordination meetings with water management institutions and a study visit to Brussels in September 2023, where project partners and institutional representatives were introduced to European policies and practices related to water governance and sustainable river basin management.





Achievements

Overall, the activities implemented during 2023 significantly contributed to strengthening scientific cooperation, institutional dialogue, civil society participation, and transboundary collaboration for the sustainable management and long-term protection of the Vjosa River Basin.

PROJECT

Supporting and Developing Widening Strategies to Tackle Hydroclimatic Extreme Events (SD – WISHEES)

OVERALL GOAL

The SD-WISHEES project aims to enable strategic coordination and cross-sector collaboration between national (R&I) funding members, researchers, innovators and a wide variety of stakeholders to address together the protection of cultural heritage in Europe and beyond in response to more and more frequent and severe hydroclimatic extreme events such as droughts and floods.

DONOR

HORIZON – EU

PROJECT AREA

Mediterranean Basin, Balkan Peninsula, and Africa

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Consiglio Nazionale Delle Ricerche (CNR) | The African Academy Of Sciences (AAS) | Institut Royal Meteorologique De Belgique (IRM/ KMI) | World Experience For Georgia (WEG) | Maltese Energy And Water Agency (EWA) | Fondazione Centro Euro-Mediterraneo Sui Cambiamenti Climatici (CMCC) | Istituto Superiore Per La Protezione E La Ricerca Ambientale (ISPRA) | Unitatea Executiva Pentru Finantarea Invatamantului Superior A Cercetarii Dezvoltarii Si Inovarii (UEFISCDI) | GSES Management B.V. (GSES) | Agence Nationale De La Recherche (ANR) | Ministero dell'università e della ricerca (MUR) | Universidade De Evora (UEVORA) | Fondacion Prima (PRIMA) | Qendra Per Mbrojtjen E Ekosistemeve Natyrore Ne Shqiperi (EcoAlbania) | Service Public Federal De Programmation Politique Scientifique (BELSPO) | Project Aid LTD

Project Key Actions

In 2023, the SD-WISHEES project was launched within the Horizon Europe framework, bringing together a diverse consortium of partners working to strengthen research and innovation collaboration on hydroclimatic extreme events and their impacts on water systems and cultural heritage. The project aimed to foster knowledge exchange, strengthen cooperation between widening and non-widening countries, and promote more integrated approaches to climate resilience and water management.

Stakeholder Engagement

As part of the consortium and Work Package 6, EcoAlbania contributed to the initial coordination and stakeholder engagement processes of the project, supporting the identification of relevant local and regional actors in Albania and facilitating connections with stakeholders from the target area. These efforts contributed to strengthening participation and ensuring the inclusion of local perspectives within the project's wider cooperation framework.

During 2023, consortium partners participated in the SD-WISHEES kick-off meeting in Bari, Italy, where the project structure, objectives, and collaborative activities were introduced and discussed among partners. Later in the year, EcoAlbania also participated in the Annual General Assembly held in Paris, France, which focused on reviewing project progress, coordinating work packages, and strengthening cooperation among consortium members.

Achievements

Through its initial implementation phase, SD-WISHEES laid the foundation for long-term cooperation and knowledge exchange between research, policy, and practice communities, contributing to broader European efforts to improve resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of climate-related challenges.

PROJECT

Watershed Environmental Education

OVERALL GOAL

To enhance environmental awareness through education of youngsters in Albania.

DONOR

US Forest Services International Programs

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

EcoAlbania

PROJECT AREA

11 schools in 4 districts across Albania

Project Key Actions - Environmental Education in Albania

During 2023, EcoAlbania implemented the project Environmental Education in Albania with the support of the United States Forest Service (USFS), aiming to strengthen environmental awareness and sustainability practices among young people across the country. The project focused on delivering engaging environmental education activities in schools, promoting hands-on learning experiences, and fostering stronger connections between children and nature.

Stakeholder Engagement

Between February and December 2023, EcoAlbania organized environmental education activities in 11 schools across 4 districts in Albania, reaching both urban and rural communities. Educational sessions were developed based on the FiKiBio methodology and combined theoretical learning with practical activities, experiments, games, and outdoor exercises designed to increase environmental awareness among school children. The project placed particular emphasis on interactive and experience-based learning, encouraging students to better understand the relationship between human activities and the environment.

Throughout the implementation period, EcoAlbania strengthened cooperation with Local Education Offices, the RAPA, local schools, and communities. These partnerships were essential in ensuring the successful implementation of activities and in promoting long-term environmental awareness at the local level.

Despite initial delays caused by administrative challenges and difficulties in obtaining approvals from national education institutions, EcoAlbania successfully adapted its approach by collaborating directly with local authorities and schools. The project also faced logistical limitations related to educational resources and access to remote areas; however, these challenges encouraged the development of innovative educational materials and strengthened collaboration with local partners.



Achievements

A major component of the project included reforestation activities involving school children and local communities. Two successful planting initiatives were carried out in Hotolisht near Shebenik National Park and in Progonat, resulting in the planting of 572 native seedlings. These activities not only contributed to ecological restoration efforts but also provided children with practical experiences that strengthened their sense of environmental responsibility and stewardship.

Another important achievement was the organization of a summer school in the Vjosa River Valley at EcoAlbania's Research Center. The program offered children a unique opportunity to learn directly in nature through educational and recreational activities focused on biodiversity, ecosystems, and river conservation. The summer school received very positive feedback from participants and their families and highlighted the value of immersive environmental education experiences.

Overall, the project contributed to increasing environmental literacy among children and educators while promoting active participation in nature conservation. Through educational activities, reforestation efforts, and community engagement, EcoAlbania continued to foster a new generation of environmentally conscious citizens committed to protecting Albania's natural heritage.



PROJECT

Albanian Waterfrog Conservation

OVERALL GOAL

The project aims to assess the species population and to set-up a Species Action Plan that would contribute to better conservation for the Albanian water frog.

DONOR

EcoAlbania Core funding

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

EcoAlbania

PROJECT AREA

Coastal Albania from Buna-Velipoja
Protected Landscape to Orikum Lagoon

Project Key Actions

The project represents a continuation and expansion of previous conservation efforts aimed at improving the understanding and long-term protection of the target species across its entire distribution range in Albania. Building on the results and lessons learned from the first phase of implementation, the current phase focuses on conducting a comprehensive assessment of the species’ population status, habitat conditions, and associated threats, while simultaneously updating and strengthening the Species Action Plan (SAP) to ensure a more effective and nationwide conservation approach.

The project is currently implementing the final monitoring session, which will complete the data collection process and provide the final scientific evidence required for the preparation of the updated SAP. The finalisation and publication of the revised Species Action Plan is expected in Autumn 2026.

Scientific Efforts

During the initial phase of the project, field observations and preliminary assessments of the species' distribution and population status were carried out primarily within the Bay of Vlora. Based on the data collected during that period, a first draft of the SAP was developed. However, due to the limited geographical scope of the study, the SAP was applicable mainly to the Vlora Bay area and could not fully address the conservation needs of the species throughout Albania.

To address these gaps, the current phase significantly expands both the geographical scope and the scientific depth of the assessment. The project aims to evaluate the species' distribution across all its potential habitats and home-range within Albania, while undertaking a more detailed analysis of population dynamics, habitat quality, pressures, and threats affecting the species. This broader approach is intended to provide a solid scientific basis for the development of a comprehensive and updated Species Action Plan covering the entire Albanian range of the species.

The methodology applied during this phase follows the same scientific and participatory approach used in the first phase of the project, ensuring consistency and comparability of results. However, this phase introduces a substantially enlarged study area and a more in-depth analytical framework, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of the species' conservation status at national level. Special emphasis is being placed on identifying key pressures and threats, evaluating their impacts on both the species and its habitats, and proposing targeted mitigation and conservation measures that can contribute to the long-term preservation of the species in Albania.

Stakeholder Engagement

In addition to field research and technical assessments, the project also integrates awareness-raising and advocacy components. Public outreach and communication activities are being implemented to increase awareness among local communities and stakeholders regarding the ecological importance of the species and the need for its protection. At the same time, the project continues to strengthen cooperation and dialogue with decision-making institutions to ensure that conservation measures and policy recommendations are effectively integrated into national environmental and biodiversity frameworks.

Compared to the first phase, where engagement focused primarily on regional and local authorities, the current phase places stronger emphasis on collaboration with national-level institutions. In particular, the project aims to enhance cooperation and advocacy efforts with central decision-making bodies, including the National Agency of Protected Areas and the Ministry of Tourism and Environment. This broader institutional engagement is expected to strengthen the sustainability and long-term impact of the project outcomes, while contributing to improved national policies and practices for species conservation and habitat management in Albania.

Achievements

Since the start of this implementation phase, several key activities have been successfully carried out. The project team completed the identification and selection of monitoring sites across the species' potential distribution range in Albania. In parallel, two seasonal monitoring campaigns have already been conducted, focusing on assessing the species' presence, habitat conditions, and the state of conservation of the ecosystems where the species occurs. These monitoring efforts have also included the identification and evaluation of existing and emerging threats affecting the species and its habitats, as well as observations on the species' behavioural responses to such pressures.

PROJECT

NGOs for Biodiversity Conservation

OVERALL GOAL

Protecting the network of Protected Areas from the reduction in area, loss and degradation of habitats and wild species of flora and fauna.

DONOR

GreenAL

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Albanian Ornithological Society (AOS),
EcoAlbania, Res Publica

PROJECT AREA

Environmental Protected Areas Netowrk in Albania

Project Key Actions

During 2023, the project continued to advance efforts aimed at strengthening biodiversity protection and safeguarding the integrity of Albania’s network of Protected Areas. The initiative focused particularly on addressing concerns related to the revision of Protected Area boundaries and the potential impacts of these changes on ecosystems, habitats, biodiversity, and local communities.

Throughout the reporting period, activities were implemented in line with the approved work plan and concentrated on four strategic directions: strengthening environmental advocacy through the consolidation of a broad civil society coalition; supporting legal processes through the collection of scientific and technical evidence; engaging local stakeholders and communities through consultations and awareness-raising activities; and increasing public visibility of biodiversity conservation issues through media outreach and communication campaigns.

Stakeholder Engagement

At local level, several consultation meetings and awareness-raising activities were organised with communities, local authorities, civil society organisations, academics, and environmental experts in different regions of Albania, including Butrint, Zall-Gjoçaj, and Mirdita. These consultations created important opportunities for dialogue regarding the implications of the rezoning process on biodiversity, habitats, water resources, and local livelihoods. The meetings also facilitated the collection of local knowledge and evidence that contributed to both advocacy and legal processes. Discussions frequently highlighted concerns regarding unsustainable tourism development, hydropower projects, and increasing environmental pressures on ecologically sensitive areas.



A significant component of the project during 2023 focused on public awareness and youth engagement. Open lectures and discussions were organised with universities and academic institutions, including the Faculty of Natural Sciences, the University of Elbasan, and “Marin Barleti” University. These activities aimed to increase awareness among students and young professionals about biodiversity conservation, the importance of Protected Areas, and the role of civil society in environmental governance and decision-making processes. The lectures contributed to strengthening understanding among young generations regarding the ecological value of Protected Areas and the need for their long-term protection.

The project also maintained a strong communication and outreach component throughout the reporting period. Awareness-raising posts, articles, videos, and media materials were continuously published on social media platforms, websites, and other communication channels of the partner organisations and coalition members. These outreach efforts generated significant public engagement and contributed to increasing visibility and public discussion around biodiversity conservation and the protection of Albania’s Protected Areas network.

Achievements

One of the project's key achievements during 2023 was the further strengthening of cooperation among environmental organisations, academic institutions, experts, and local stakeholders advocating for the protection of Protected Areas. The coalition supporting biodiversity conservation expanded to include more than 22 organisations and experts nationwide. In parallel, a draft Memorandum of Cooperation was prepared to formalise and strengthen long-term collaboration among civil society actors working to preserve Albania's natural ecosystems and biodiversity.

The project also continued to support strategic environmental litigation processes related to governmental decisions affecting Protected Areas. Considerable efforts were dedicated to preparing legal documentation and collecting scientific evidence required for court proceedings. This included detailed analyses of governmental decisions concerning the revision of Protected Area boundaries, GIS-based mapping of affected areas, and assessments of ecological impacts resulting from these changes. Technical information and scientific data were systematically compiled to support legal complaints aimed at protecting the ecological integrity of Protected Areas.

Through its integrated approach combining advocacy, legal action, scientific evidence, stakeholder engagement, and public communication, the project contributed to strengthening cooperation among civil society organisations and increasing public participation in biodiversity protection processes in Albania. The initiative further reinforced collaboration between environmental organisations, local communities, academic institutions, and legal experts, creating a stronger and more coordinated platform for the long-term conservation of Albania's Protected Areas and ecological integrity.



05

Communication

How we informed, engaged, and mobilized in 2023.

VOICE & VISIBILITY

Communication & outreach



6

Press releases



39

Media articles



5

Reports

The year 2023 marked a turning point for communication and public outreach around the Vjosa River following its designation as **Europe’s first Wild River National Park**. This historic achievement attracted significant international attention and positioned the Vjosa as a global example of river conservation, drawing journalists, filmmakers, researchers, and nature enthusiasts from across Europe and beyond.

Throughout the year, EcoAlbania actively supported numerous media visits and interviews aimed at showcasing the ecological, cultural, and social values of the Vjosa River and its surrounding landscapes. International journalists and documentary producers visited key sites along the river, including the Vjosa Delta, Narta Lagoon, Zvërnec, Tepelenë, Bënçë, Përmet, and Vlorë, documenting both the river’s exceptional biodiversity and the successful campaign that led to its protection.

Among the most notable media engagements were field visits with journalists from France, Canada, Germany, and Spain, as well as collaborations with major international outlets and production companies. Coverage of the Vjosa appeared in leading media platforms including French national television TFI, Canadian Geographic, National Geographic, ZDF, Ballena Blanca, and Voice of America. These stories highlighted the river’s ecological significance, the communities that depend on it, and the collaborative efforts that secured its protection.

Media outreach played a crucial role in strengthening international recognition of the Vjosa and raising awareness about the importance of safeguarding free-flowing rivers. Through strategic communication efforts, the project helped bring the Vjosa story to a broad global audience and reinforced Albania’s role as a leader in river conservation.

During 2023, EcoAlbania contributed to the publication of 39 media articles, 6 press releases, and 5 reports. Social media communication also supported outreach efforts, with Facebook content reaching approximately 9,400 views and helping engage national and international audiences with project activities and conservation achievements.

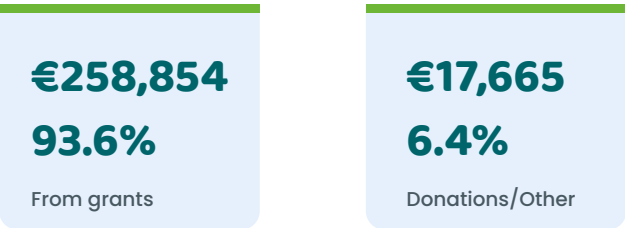
06

Financials

How the organization was funded and how every euro was put to work.

FINANCIAL

Financial overview



Revenue

EcoAlbania’s revenues are generated primarily from grants, which constitute the main source of funding for its activities. A smaller share, approximately 6% comes from donations and other sources. This funding structure suggests a stable and predictable financial base, enabling EcoAlbania to plan and implement its programs effectively.

Expenditures

Expenditures are categorized into human resources, assets, administrative costs and activities. Human resources, including staff salaries and expert fees, represented the largest share of the organization’s expenditures, reflecting EcoAlbania’s continued investment in professional capacity and expertise. Activity-related costs constituted another important component of the budget, supporting the implementation of the organization’s programs and initiatives. Administrative costs and asset-related expenditures accounted for a smaller share of overall spending, contributing to the effective operation and management of the organization.

Human Resources		€ 158,613.00	(64%)
<i>Staff salaries</i>		€ 107,476.00	(43%)
<i>Expert fees</i>		€ 51,137.00	(21%)
Activities		€ 59,356.00	(24%)
Administrative costs		€ 24,459.00	(10%)
Assets		€ 5,931.00	(2%)
Total revenues expenditures		€ 276,519.00	

07

Reflections & Outlook

What we learned in 2023, and where we are headed next.

REFLECTIONS

Challenges & lessons learned

The year 2023 marked a historic turning point for nature conservation in Albania with the declaration of Europe's first Wild River National Park. At the same time, this milestone reinforced an important lesson: conservation achievements are not endpoints, but the beginning of new responsibilities. The experiences gained throughout the year demonstrated that protecting nature requires persistence, adaptive approaches, and strong partnerships among institutions, communities, scientists, and civil society.

One of the key challenges that emerged was ensuring that legal protection translates into effective conservation on the ground. While the declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park represented the culmination of more than a decade of efforts, new threats affecting tributaries such as the Shushica and Kardhiq rivers highlighted the vulnerability of ecosystems even after protection has been achieved. These experiences reinforced the importance of continuous monitoring, science-based advocacy, and active public engagement to ensure that conservation commitments are effectively implemented and maintained over time.

The year also underlined the importance of science and international cooperation. Efforts to address concerns related to infrastructure developments affecting the Vjosa Delta and Narta Lagoon demonstrated the value of scientific evidence and international environmental mechanisms. The growing involvement of scientists, institutions, and partners from Albania and abroad confirmed that addressing complex environmental challenges requires collaboration that extends beyond organizational and national boundaries.

The launch of the ISCCA project brought valuable lessons regarding landscape-scale conservation and ecological connectivity. Although no major implementation challenges were encountered during the initial phase, introducing and communicating the concept of ecological corridors proved to be an important task. As ecological connectivity remains a relatively new concept in Albania, promoting its significance among local institutions and stakeholders required continuous awareness-raising and clear communication. These experiences highlighted that successful conservation depends not only on scientific and technical solutions, but also on building a common understanding of how connected landscapes contribute to biodiversity conservation and sustainable territorial development. The encouraging response from municipalities, protected area administrations, and local actors demonstrated the strong potential for developing collaborative and participatory approaches to conservation beyond protected area boundaries.

Similarly, efforts to strengthen the science-policy interface and transboundary cooperation within the Vjosa/Aoós basin showed that building trust and fostering cooperation among institutions, experts, and civil society organizations requires time and sustained engagement. However, these experiences confirmed that shared ecosystems require shared solutions and highlighted the importance of dialogue and cooperation in achieving integrated and sustainable river basin management.

Environmental education activities carried out throughout the year provided another valuable lesson. Despite administrative and logistical challenges, the enthusiasm shown by schools, teachers, and students demonstrated the importance of experiential learning in strengthening environmental awareness and stewardship among younger generations. Investing in education and empowering future generations remain essential for ensuring the long-term protection of Albania's natural heritage.

Above all, 2023 reaffirmed that successful conservation is built on partnerships. Communities, scientists, institutions, environmental organizations, and international supporters all contributed to the progress achieved during the year. Their collective efforts demonstrated that meaningful change is achieved through trust, perseverance, and a shared vision for the future.

The lessons gained throughout 2023 strengthened EcoAlbania's conviction that conservation is a long-term journey. They reminded us that historic achievements are measured not only by the milestones we celebrate, but by our commitment to safeguarding them for generations to come.

“The greatest victories for nature are not those we achieve in a single moment, but those we preserve through continued care and collective responsibility.

PRIORITIES

Looking ahead to 2024

Looking ahead, EcoAlbania will continue to operationalize the protection promised by the Vjosa Wild River National Park – through advocacy, science, monitoring, and community engagement. The declaration of the park is a foundation, not a finish line.

1 Vjosa NP Implementation

Operationalize protection of Europe’s first Wild River National Park.

2 Ecological Corridors

Advance the southern Action Plan and integrate corridors into local planning.

3 Transboundary Work

Continue Vjosa/Aoös cooperation with Greece.

4 Education at Scale

Expand school activities, reforestation, and the summer school program.

5 Strategic Litigation

Continue defending protected areas through evidence-based advocacy.

6 Species Conservation

Complete the updated Species Action Plan for the Albanian water frog.

Stay connected

Join us in protecting Albania's natural heritage.

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